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ABSTRACT

Responding to a shortage of special education teachers with multicultural training, the University of Utah designed a series of American Indian specialization courses for teachers, leading to a master's degree in professional practice. Essential course components include cultural awareness, nonbiased assessment, specialized curriculum and instructional practices, and development of transition and collaboration strategies to benefit Native American youth with disabilities. The opportunity to take classes via distance delivery and come on campus for summer classes is a major incentive for participation. The University of Utah has been delivering special education coursework to individuals living in rural areas since 1981 and currently uses videotape recordings of an on-campus class plus a facilitator who manages the class at the distance site. Utah's San Juan School District has continually had a shortage of certified special educators. A collaborative assessment led to the decision to recruit teachers from within the district, create a second delivery site in the district, and provide training and support on-site. Telecommunications provides improved communication through E-mail, and the Internet enables greater access to on-campus faculty, databases, and other students. Improvements at a case study school in San Juan District include a reduction of inappropriate classifications, implementation of an inclusionary approach, and implementation of collaboration practices. Includes a special education teacher's reflections on the first year of teaching at an elementary school on the Navajo Nation. (TD)

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PREPARING SPECIAL EDUCATORS TO WORK WITH CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE EXCEPTIONAL LEARNERS: A RURAL CASE STUDY

Introduction

The detrimental impact and failure of the anglo educational system upon American Indian children is well documented. The research enumerates problems regarding the training of teachers, cultural differences in the non-verbal regulation of classroom interaction, culturally appropriate curriculum, and psychoeducational assessment measures and practices (Littlebear, 1993, Wells, 1991, Baer & Bennett, 1987, Gundersen, 1986, Fifield, 1983, McShane, 1983).

Conditions of American Indian Children with Disabilities in Utah

In a state that appears to lack cultural differences, there exists significant unaddressed diversity. In grades K-12, there is a combined American Indian student population of 6,705, which represents approximately 1.5 % of the school population. American Indians in Utah include five different tribes living on seven different reservations throughout the rural/remote areas of the state. In addition, American Indian populations are represented in urban "Pockets" along the Wasatch Front. The educational conditions of those Native Americans with disabilities has been characterized by a dire shortage of education professionals prepared to deliver effective teaching practices addressing their individual needs (Littlebear, 1993, McLaughlin, 1991, Wells, 1991). Disproportionally large numbers of Native American children and youth (as high as 33% in some Utah schools) have been placed in special education programs, while representation in gifted and talented programs is disproportionally low. Large numbers (as many as 40 % in some areas) of American Indian youth have given up the struggle presented by existing formal education, and have dropped out of school.

Unfortunately, American Indian students rarely have extended contact with Indian and non-Indian educators with multicultural training. Many teachers who serve Native American populations receive insufficient instruction relative to the education, economics, resources, needs, aspirations and cultures of Native Americans (Littlebear, 1993, Wells, 1991, Mahan, 1987).

Specialized Teacher Preparation Graduate Training

In response to this need, the University of Utah, Department of Special Education has designed and implemented a series of American Indian specialization courses leading to a M Ed. degree in professional practice. Although appropriate teacher preparation programs which

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emphasize the teaching of Native American students exist in some regions of the United States, most are not applicable to rural/remote as well as urban geographies. The model developed and refined in this project accommodates many different Indian tribes and students of different exceptionality areas through its focus. The essential components of the model include: (a) awareness; (b) non-biased assessment; (c) specialized curriculum and instructional practices; and (d) development of transition and collaboration strategies to benefit Native American youth with disabilities.

Awareness: Awareness and appreciation of Native American culture represents the nucleus of the model. Decades of attempting to educate Native Americans using anglo-centered strategies of sequential learning have been met with resistance and failure. Native Americans must be allowed to apply their culturally derived strength of holistic problem solving to their education.

Nonbiased Assessment: American Indians are overrepresented among special education populations. Nonbiased assessment is of foremost concern and must be practiced by special educators working with Native American populations. Assessment procedures and processes that do not take into account cultural or linguistic differences must not be used for the purposes of classification. Assessment must be referenced to the culture and beliefs of its inhabitants. Appropriate early assessment and intervention of learning problems must be a paramount goal of every special educator. American Indians who are gifted and talented must be identified and given encouragement and appropriate programming to meet their needs.

Curriculum Modification/Delivery Strategies: Teachers and other professionals working with American Indian children and youth must be taught how their students learn best. Teaching strategies should emphasize experiential learning and visual-auditory-kinesthetic-tactile distributed practice experiences. Team or cooperative learning strategies should be used when appropriate. Competition between students should be de-emphasized to foster learning with this population. Curriculum must be referenced to what the students are interested in learning, and be based on the needs and expectations of the community.

Transition/Collaboration: Teachers must be trained in transition and collaboration strategies between regular education teachers, administrators, specialists, tribal leaders, extended families, and governmental agencies administering services to American Indian students with disabilities. Teachers must work from a position of strength and be knowledgeable in special education and tribal law. Teachers must use their collaboration strategies to initiate transition programming in a student's elementary years. To the greatest extent possible, the goal of educational programs should be to provide Indian students with disabilities with the tools to participate successfully in their chosen community as adults. The possibility of paid employment should be the expected outcome of all programs for the mild to moderately disabled. Employment training and work experiences must be community-referenced and supported.

Project Outcomes to Date

Since 1991, 55 individuals, 23 from urban areas and 32 from rural areas, have received specialized training that has prepared them to assume roles as teachers and leaders in the education of Native Americans with disabilities. Prior to implementation of this project there was just one certified special education teacher who is Indian and teaching in Utah. At this writing, 15 American Indian teachers are working towards special education certification, and ten have been accepted into the Masters program as well.

The majority of Native American participants live and teach in rural/remote communities of Utah and the surrounding states. The opportunity to come on campus for summer classes and remain in their communities and take classes via distance delivery was cited by these individuals as a major factor in their decision to participate in the program.

Distance Education Teacher Training Model

Recruitment and retention of qualified special educators has been a recurring dilemma for rural school districts (Helge, 1981; Marrs, 1984; McIntosh & Parsons, 1987). To address this problem the Department of Special Education at the University of Utah, with support from the Utah State Office of Education, began delivery of special education coursework to individuals living in rural parts of the state in 1981. Initial distance courses were taught on-site by faculty members who drove to the various locations. However, this model proved to be both time consuming and costly. In 1985, the first live interactive telecourse was taught over the state EDNET system. This model continues to be used but it has several limitations including limited and inconvenient access times, a limited number of access sites, and cost.

Currently, the primary method of delivering coursework to rural students is through a model called "Professor Plus" (Sebastian, 1991). In this model the "Professor" is a video recording of an on-campus class. The "Plus" is a master's level facilitator who manages the class at the distance site. The on-site facilitator serves many functions, including: (a) promoting class discussions; (b) answering student questions and clarifying concepts; (c) serving as a liaison with the University; (d) setting the tone for the class by keeping students on-task; and (e) proctoring exams.

Collaborative Needs Assessment

San Juan School District in Utah has continually struggled with an acute shortage of certified special educators. Located in the remote Four Corners region, the district encompasses a geographic area roughly the size of Rhode Island. Much of the district lies within the Navajo Nation. The White Mesa (Southern Ute) reservation is also included in the district. In the past, efforts have been made to recruit qualified teachers to the district. However, turnover rates have been very high, especially for those schools located on or near the reservations. Efforts to recruit teachers from within the district have also been difficult because: (a) many prospective teachers are unwilling or unable to leave home to receive the training, and (b) salaries in neighboring states tend to be higher. To address these problems, representatives from the Utah State Office

of Education, the University of Utah, Utah State University, the Utah Learning Resource Center, and the San Juan School District met in the spring of 1995 to formulate an action plan.

Identified Needs

The first step in formulating the action plan was to identify the specific needs of the district. To do this, the special education personnel from each school were reviewed in terms of certification and/or progress towards certification. It was determined that the schools in the southern part of the district on or near the Navajo Nation had the greatest needs, and that all schools within the district experienced a critical shortage of certified teachers in the area of severe disabilities. Although all parties agreed that outside recruitment efforts should continue, the more permanent solution seemed to be to recruit teachers from within the district and to provide training and support on-site.

Identified Resources

The University of Utah's Distance Education Program had been delivering classes to students in San Juan District for several years with mixed success. Students from the northern part of the district tended to make more progress and to stick with the program better than those from the southern part. Some of the identified problems for the southern students included (a) greater distances to travel for classes, (b) lack of on-site mentors, and (c) difficulty with the class delivery model. The following were implemented to help address these problems. First, a recent on-campus graduate of the program was recruited to work in one of the southern schools and to facilitate classes there. This would help to reduce travel time for many students by creating a second delivery site in the district. Moreover, it would provide a mentor/resource-teacher for many students (an account of this individual's experiences is presented in the final section of this paper). Second, many of the more technical classes would either be taught live on-site or facilitated by university clinical faculty. In addition, several of the students would receive training and support from the American Indian specialization program that was described in the first section of this paper.

The following resources were also identified and committed. Utah State University, in collaboration with the University of Utah and the Utah State Office of Education, would provide training and support in the area of early childhood special education. The Utah Learning Resource Center, in collaboration with the district, would identify areas of immediate concern and deliver a series of workshops throughout the year. The state office of education committed to provide on-going support at the district level. The school district committed to support its teachers by covering the cost of tuition, and by providing increased on-site supervision.

Promising Uses of Technology

A major limitation of the current course delivery model is in the area of feedback relating to student progress (Egan, McCleary, Sebastian, and Lacy, 1988; Egan, Welch, Page, & Sebastian, 1992). Several factors have been identified that lead to problems associated with feedback. First, distance students have complained about the length of time it takes for faculty

members to return corrected assignments. Turnaround time to correct and return student exams, papers, or other projects is often two or more weeks. Second, distance learners have complained about the lack of access to faculty members. Many are intimidated about calling professors, and others expressed frustrations about playing "phone tag" with faculty members. Moreover, although the on-site facilitators are very helpful, distance students also have expressed a desire to have the same degree of access to faculty members as their on-campus counterparts.

A second major limitation of the model is that distance learners lack access to many of the resources that are available to on-campus students. The most detrimental of these is limited access to library resources. Students in the teacher certification/masters degree program are required to complete 74 hours of coursework. The majority of the courses require some form of research paper. On-campus students have direct access to the University Library System, as well as the Graduate School of Education's Curriculum Library. At this time, distance students either must travel to the campus to access the library or plead with an on-campus faculty member to assist with their literature search. This lack of resources is frustrating for distance students. Moreover, their research papers often lack the depth of their on-campus peers due to the lack of resources. Distance students tend to rely on the course readings and whatever literature is available in their schools to write assigned research papers.

A third major limitation that distance students experience limited access to other students. Although the existing program uses student cohorts at each site, the students usually go through the entire program with the same individuals. Only when the students come on campus during the summer quarter do they get to interact with other students. A major component of the "university experience" should be an opportunity to meet and interact with a diverse number of individuals. This interaction enables the student to consider a variety of opinions and views, thereby broadening the student's scope and world view. Unfortunately, distance students are presented with limited opportunities for this.

In the past, the telephone and the postal service were the primary means of communication. Now, however, the infrastructure is in place to utilize telecommunications (i.e., computer networks). As part of the 1992-1997 Utah State Public Education Strategic Plan, every teacher in the state will have a computer and access to both a Local Area Network (LAN) and a Wide Area Network (WAN). These networks will enable distance students to have greater access to the university (Sebastian, 1995). An immediate benefit of telecommunications is improved communication through e-mail. With access to the Internet, individuals living in rural/remote areas have greater access to on-campus faculty members. The Internet offers many other benefits for distance learners including access to databases such as ERIC and university libraries. This access enables distance students to conduct the same high quality literature searches as their on-campus peers. Another benefit is that distance students gain access to a greater diversity of peers through electronic bulletin boards.

Kester and Beacham (1995) stated that it is vital for universities and public schools to work together in order to prepare preservice and inservice teachers to use the technologies of the 21st century. Moreover, the literature is clear that teacher education programs should provide technology training. The Department of Special Education at the University of Utah has made a

commitment to infuse technology into the curriculum. It is critical that distance students receive appropriate training and support in using the new technologies.

A Teacher's First Year Reflections

The following section is an account of a special education teacher's first year at a public elementary school on the Navajo Nation.

As I was reminded recently by a Navajo woman, the school I teach in is not in a rural area, it is the frontier. This statement was intended as humor, of course, but in many ways she spoke the truth. Because I was born, raised, educated, and employed in an urban area, moving to a rural area to begin my teaching career was a difficult decision as well as a huge challenge. This was not just any rural area, however, for I had accepted a job on the Navajo Nation in southeastern Utah. Due to several factors, I felt qualified to accept my position. I also knew that all of my preservice training and limited experience with Navajo children could in no way prepare me for all that was to come.

My preservice training included many classes that have directly helped me to have a successful first year at the case study school. First of all, I have a B.A. in English with a minor in Native American studies. My undergraduate studies included 15 hours of Navajo language instruction and 20 hours of Native American and Navajo cultural instruction. The University of Utah's Special Education program is a graduate level program that includes some classes of extreme relevance to teaching in a rural setting. For example, Educational Partnerships, a class that teaches collaboration skills, has proven to be very useful because I use these skills on an hourly basis as I interact with a staff that is 70 percent Navajo. Furthermore, classes that focused on inclusion, behavior management, and curriculum adaptation were necessary to lead to the success we have had in including all of our students nearly 100% of the time. As I work with the general educators within their classrooms, collaboration skills, knowledge of behavior management, and knowledge of curriculum and instructional adaptations are my greatest allies.

Another aspect of my preservice preparation involved training in individual assessment and interpretation. This training is very useful as classification issues arise involving students who demonstrate limited English proficiency. Also, the classes I took in the area of special education legal issues have been very helpful and have allowed me to serve as a resource for teachers and parents. Lastly, my preservice experience included several practicums within various special education settings. All of the education in the world is no match for real-world experience under the guidance of mentoring teachers and university professors. These practicums were the most stimulating portion of my preservice training.

As I moved to the Navajo Nation I had several initial expectations regarding the people, the culture, and how I would be accepted. I expected the people to be kind but distant toward me. However, my peers have accepted me and provided me with opportunities to engage in cultural events. These events have included fairs, dances, and sacred ceremonies. It is almost as if they want me to learn more about Navajo culture in order to better serve our students. I have

also learned that there are many cultural differences that include tone of voice, disagreements, moral values, and other behaviors that at times hinder my improving relationship with my peers. However, my colleagues forgive very easily and are always willing to answer my questions regarding the community and the culture. And, most importantly, my students and I have developed a very appropriate relationship that promotes self-efficacy and a stimulating learning environment.

Not all of my observations have been as positive as the experiences I have shared with my students and peers. Poverty on the Navajo Nation is a serious concern. A teacher is rarely prepared to see a student with filthy limbs and dirty clothes because the student's home has a dirt floor. Also, many of my students do not have electricity or running water. This may be by choice but, regardless, this factor inhibits learning at home because time has to be spent hauling firewood or water. Limited English proficiency is another issue on the Navajo Nation that affects many students. Extreme care must be taken to ensure that students are not classified incorrectly when English language deficiency is the only problem. Busing is another frequent problem. Some of my students travel 30 to 40 miles to attend school. When it rains, many of the dirt roads become muddy and impassable for buses. This is very problematic for those students who require special transportation that includes delivery to and from their home.

To those who are considering working in rural areas, I have a few suggestions. First, learn as much as you can about the culture and subcultures of the area. These could include Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, African Americans, farmers, and various religions. Be sure that you really want to move to and teach in a rural area. Be willing to adapt your plans as you learn more about the school and the people. It is also imperative to have a broad knowledge base in the field of special education, especially in the areas of collaboration, behavior management, curriculum and instruction adaptation, and legal issues. After all, in many instances, you will be thought of as the expert, and you must give suggestions or dispense information without sounding arrogant. And, while you are pursuing your certificate, I would recommend that you work as a special education paraprofessional. For teacher trainers, theory and classwork are very valuable, but when these are coupled with hands-on practicum experiences new teachers will be much more prepared for their first teaching jobs. Also, a practicum focusing on the preparation and defense of a school's special education files for a program administrative review (PAR) would be invaluable.

Improvements at the Case Study School

Several changes and improvements have been made at the case study school. First, two years ago, approximately 100 students of the total school population of 300 were classified as needing special education services. As can be imagined by the sheer numbers, some of these students were inappropriately assessed and identified as students with disabilities. The multidisciplinary team has worked very hard to reduce the number of inappropriate classifications. The result of this effort is that currently 32 students out of a total student population of 330 are classified as needing special education services, bringing the school in line with the national average of 10-12 percent.

Second, the case study school has implemented an inclusionary approach that has enabled all of the students to spend nearly the entire day with their peers in a general education classroom. This is perhaps best illustrated by a first grade boy with dual sensory impairments (deaf and blind) and some cognitive deficits who spends the entire day in a first grade classroom and has made remarkable progress. In fact, the program specialist for the Utah Project for Children with Dual Sensory Impairments highly endorses this program. There are also four other students with severe disabilities who spend either the entire day or nearly the entire day with their peers in a general education setting. This is not to say that these students are not served by special education, but rather, the services are taken to them. Lastly, effective collaboration practices are slowly being implemented and adopted by the staff. The special education teachers are constantly consulting with the general education teachers in order to modify our students' programs as necessary. Also, the principal has begun the process of implementing a Teacher Assistance Team (TAT). In the future, all teacher-made referrals to special education must first go through the TAT process. Ultimately, the case study school hopes to achieve an atmosphere where all staff, from the principal to the teachers to the custodians, accept responsibility to educate all students regardless of ability.

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